2010

Rethinking Community-Service Education in Singapore Schools

Cheng Chye Chua

RETHINKING COMMUNITY-SERVICE EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS

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From Community Involvement Programmes to Service-Learning, Singapore has continued to grapple with how to encourage the spirit of service among students. Author Chua Cheng Chye, an educator, writes about what is still lacking in the overall picture and why ecological thinking can provide a rounded, holistic approach to service and community-building.

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When the idea of the Community Involvement Programme (CIP) was first introduced in Singapore in the late 1990s, students were required to "serve" the community for a stipulated number of hours a year.[1] This resulted in too many episodic compulsory programmes that were not adequately grounded in best practices of community engagement and community learning.

Service-Learning was subsequently introduced around 2000 to 2001 to improve upon CIP, with an emphasis on preparation, meeting real needs and reflection.[2] This improved the situation and in recent years, there has been an increase in meaningful community service programmes both locally and overseas. These programmes are varied in form, approach and learning. Understandably, much of the learning foci are influenced by what is articulated to be important, which include, among other areas: Leadership, personal and interpersonal awareness, project management, resilience, cross cultural learning and cultivating an appreciation for the good governance and relatively stable life one can have in Singapore.

While these objectives are important, I take it as self-evident that the overarching aim of community service (or community education) programmes is to help students acquire relevant community-centric dispositions and skills. It is interesting that when we talk about 21st century skills, we tend to focus on information technology and the new economy. We need to also ask what skills and dispositions our young people need so that they can be in a better position to manage and solve the social and environmental challenges that lie ahead.

An ecological way of knowing provides fertile ground for pedagogical and curricular innovations that can help develop relevant community-centric skills and dispositions, and also synergise community, outdoor and environmental education. I would like to highlight two ecological perspectives that inform my approach to crafting a holistic community education programme.

ECOLOGICAL THINKING

Falzon expressed the need for mental models to make sense of experience:

> *"Encountering the world...necessarily involves a process of ordering the world in terms of our categories, organising it and classifying it, actively bringing it under control in some way. We always bring some framework to bear on the world in our dealings with it. Without this organisational activity, we would be unable to make any sense of the world at all."* [3]

Even though reflection is now quite commonplace, it is useful to think about what mental models we use to guide our reflections. The ability and inclination to make sense of community in a way that is grounded in ethics and sustainability is by no means a given. Ecological thinking can provide a conceptual framework for us to make sense of our experiences in a sustainable and ethical way. Fritjof Capra (2005), a theoretical physicist who founded the Center for Ecological Literacy, takes it further by explaining that the community is a non-linear living system that resists scientific quantification. Understanding and living in this organic and complex system requires a shift from traditional Western linear thinking to one that is rooted in relationships, connectedness and context. If we do not introduce alternative ways of knowing, students and teachers will, in all likelihood, make sense of their experiences using the same thought processes that are responsible for creating and perpetuating many of the contemporary social and environmental problems we face today.

Ecological thinking, for the purpose of this article, is defined as thought processes that frame new knowledge and experience within a larger, contextually-appropriate social web. It is also a belief system that preserves the rights of existing members of the social web to exist and grow. There is an explicitly moral tone to the latter half of the definition. As an educator, I subscribe to an ethics of care rather than "survival of the fittest" that underpins natural ecological systems, and indeed, some aspects of social life in Singapore.

HOW DO WE GO ABOUT INTRODUCING ECOLOGICAL THINKING TO STUDENTS?

Understand and enjoy the connected world early in life

In their early years, children's minds are open and receptive to a broad understanding of ideologies and value systems. It's an apt period in a child's life to introduce them to the ecological world of nature and community.

Stories that communicate these experiences are an ideal medium through which to engender a sense of social and ecological responsibility among the young. Stories also inculcate ideas about reciprocity, the importance of personal journeys and relationships of discovery that all play a role in building community.

While objective, scientific charts that outline facts about food webs and ecological systems are critical to building general knowledge, the broader role of science in knowing (and feeling) the world around us needs to be clarified and perhaps even re-examined. Enlightened but scientifically-unaware societies have long since realised the importance of maintaining ecologically-sound relationships with their environments. Many use myths, legends and rituals to inculcate both the practices and beliefs that ground their people in respect and humility so critical in maintaining a balanced relationship. The discipline of science has a tendency to dismiss these age-old practices as backward and primitive. At the same time, its practitioners are unable to fill the void that has been created over time, in the search for an objective, quantifiable rendering of the world. This void was once filled with the wisdom of ecologically-sound thinking and moral conscience. It is useful therefore, for community service programmes in primary schools to incorporate stories and habits of practice that are grounded in sustainable relationships, care and respect for the natural, physical and social world.

Organic tacit growth over immediate measured impact

Our current perception of youth engagement and service is overly influenced by business and scientific paradigms: The greater the apparent impact over the shortest period of time, the better and only that which can be measured is valid. This is tenuous. Among other things, values learning, relationships and social cohesion cannot be quantified meaningfully. Large scale, ad hoc projects run the risk of being disruptive. We end up implementing projects for the community in an unsustainable way, rather than with the community in a manner that will ensure there is continuity long after youth volunteers have returned home. Ecological thinking requires us to trust the process and to take a long term orientation. It requires a commitment to invest in organic growth and the realisation that community ecologies are complex and take time to grow. Teachers and trainers in this context need to instill a sense of humility in young people so that they are not driven by the desire for immediate results. Community engagement also necessarily requires immersion, in that it takes time to understand the behavioural patterns and complex relationships that form a community. In this regard, the discipline of ethnography, with its emphasis on understanding the sum total of a community's life – from belief systems, to ritual practices and 'webs of significance' - is an apt approach to community engagement.[4]

Journey through the ripple effect

A discourse dominated by ideas of self-gratification features significantly in the lives of youth, both in Singapore, and around the world. In individualistic and consumerist societies that value independence over inter-dependence, the tendency is to give the greatest credence to one's immediate well-being. To counter this isolationist tendency, it is necessary to build a way of thinking that considers consequences over time, in the context of places and people. The "reflection phase" that was referred to earlier in this article involves, in part, forming the habit of critically analysing the impact of one's actions beyond their immediate significance. The more we practice weighing short term returns against long-term consequences, the more long term orientation and community responsibility become part of our consciousness. Many indigenous communities in North America have been known to consider the impact of their actions up to seven generations after them.[5]

Value the contribution of all

Singapore is a society that thrives on excellence. A premium is placed on high achievers. While striving for excellence is necessary, we seem to have instilled this value in a manner that discounts those who are economically less successful. This results in a society that is implicitly and quietly class-conscious. Singaporean youth can and ought to be encouraged to respect people, regardless of the kind of jobs they do. Some of the best schools in the country have a greater responsibility to ensure that their students understand the valuable role every member of society plays in the larger social fabric. The giant trees in rainforests capture our attention and are prized for their timber, but we fail to take notice of the

micro-organisms that quietly break down complex biological materials into nutrients so that the cycle of life can continue. In an interdependent ecological system, every member of the web is important and valued.

Community resource is a privilege not a right

In mature communities, resources continue to exist because prior systems and people existed to create them. The utilisation of community resources, therefore, must be accompanied by practices that support the preservation of the systems, patterns of behaviour and conditions that gave rise to these resources. In environmentally-attuned societies, the practice of ritual offerings in gratitude for game or a bountiful harvest is a statement of gratitude grounded in the understanding that resources are not limitless and prudence must be exercised.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Despite the ideas discussed above, these cognitive journeys through one's ecosystem provide no assurance that one will strive to protect the integrity of that system. Similarly, these values hold little meaning if there is no relationship between oneself and the community. What is needed is a personal connection to other members of the ecological system, and a personal belief that the system is worth preserving. An individual is more likely to commit to community, if he/she has begun cultivating deeper relationships with other members of that community.

Thankfully, humans are social beings and relationships form organically and spontaneously. As educators, we need to provide the time and space for our students to build meaningful relationships with the people they are serving, the landscape in which they are working and the broader society. The overall effect is that the knowledge and values gained are intertwined with the cognitive and social learning processes. When this happens, certain attitudinal and behavioural transformations will be palpable. Motivations become intrinsic, ownership grows and along with it, activism.

As we're all well-aware, human civilisation has been growing in a manner that is now considered to be unsustainable. Societies across time have shaped what they consider to be the "common good." Given the extent of environmental degradation that is apparent today and the increasingly divisive effects of capitalism, I believe that ecologically-sound values will feature strongly in the evolution of the prevailing "common good" and that ecological thinking will grow in relevance. All that remains is for this shift in thinking to be articulated and shared by educators and young people alike.

Further Reading

Capra, F. (2005), Speaking Nature's Language in Ecological Literacy – Educating our Children for a Sustainable World.

Jarvis, P. (2009), Learning to be a person in society in Contemporary Theories of Learning. Routledge.

Ecological Thinking – a new approach to educational change. Shoshana University Press of America, 2002.

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1 Ministry of Education, "Community Development Programmes and Service Learning." http://www.ne.edu.sg/cip.htm.

2 Ibid.

3 P. Jarvis, "Learning to be a person in society" in *Contemporary Theories of Learning* (Routledge 2009), 26.

4 Clifford Geertz, "Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Culture* (NY: Basic Books, 1973), Chapter 1.

5 The theory is often advocated and discussed by the Iroquois people. Speech by Haudenosaunee Faithkeeper, Chief Oren Lyons to delegates at the United Nations Organization Opening of "The Year of the Indigenous Peoples" (1993), United Nations General Assembly Auditorium, United Nations Plaza, New York City, December 10, 1992. http://www.ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/OLatUNin92.html. See the following on how this thinking has entered academic and research work on environmental issues: http://www.cbp.ucar.edu/conferences/seven_generations/speakers.php and http://www.cbp.ucar.edu/documents/Winds_of_Change_ClimateChange.pdf.